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CIA in Retreat?

Mrs Nhu, President Diem's very sister-in-law, who is just beginning a three weeks' speaking tour in the United States, is being ignored officially, but on past performance she can be relied upon to provoke new demands for the reform—if not the replacement—of the present government of South Vietnam. This may not please President Kennedy who seems to hope that his endorsement of the report of Mr McNamara, the Secretary of Defence, and General Taylor may lead to a temporary truce in the war over Vietnam which has been raging in Washington; roughly the State Department has taken the view that the Vietcong will never be defeated if political repression is tolerated in Vietnam, while the military feel that demands for reform would hamper the war effort. The carefully edited conclusions of the military mission (there are said to be a number of secret findings and recommendations) contained something for both sides. They were reasonably cheerful about the progress of the war—too cheerful perhaps in asserting that American involvement should be unnecessary after the end of 1965. On the other hand, they reported that the political situation was serious and might affect the war in days to come.

The real loser seems to be the Central Intelligence Agency; Mr Richardson, the head of its mission in Vietnam, has been recalled and, the President said this week, is to be transferred; in his place, it is thought, Mr Lodge, the American Ambassador, would like a man who would confine himself to the gathering and sifting of intelligence and who would not try to combine this with actual operations. It is an old complaint against the CIA that it cannot be counted upon for disinterested intelligence when it is deeply involved with policies and personalities. Nowhere has it been more engaged than in Vietnam, where it has long been in the field. The CIA has been close to the Diem family, including the head of the secret police, Mr Nhu. After his special forces smashed up Buddhist pagodas in August, it was alleged that they enjoyed a monthly subvention of, it is said, \$250,000 from CIA funds. Mr Richardson's transfer is proof that the Administration means Mr Lodge's writ to run in South Vietnam, apart from purely military matters, and hints at toughness to come toward President Diem. Mr Lodge, who is openly critical of Mrs Nhu and police repression, is a Republican and one of the reasons for his appointment is said to have been the Administration's view that Vietnam could be taken out of politics. Much has been said, however, could be said of the appointment of Mr McCone, another Republican—as head of the CIA in 1961. In satisfying Mr Lodge the President has stepped on Mr McCone's toes. But Mr Kennedy made hand some amends this week when he rejected suggestions that the CIA had ever done anything but support government policy in Vietnam—though this raises new questions about that policy. He also rejected proposals that some new system of supervision should be established over the agency.

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